



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Arrest of Belarusian Opposition Members

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 4, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is a pity that we must again raise our deep concerns over recent events in Belarus. On April 27, a court in Minsk sentenced former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich to 15 days in jail on the grounds that he had organized a so-called "unsanctioned" demonstration to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Chornobyl. Two other leading opposition figures, Vintsuk Vyachorka and Aleksandr Buchvostau, also received 15-day sentences, while Sergei Kalyakin – well, apparently he was let off a little bit easier – he received a 14-day sentence. In addition, Anatoliy Lebedko was picked up by unidentified security officers on April 26, the day of the rally, was interrogated, beaten, and, after several hours, dumped in a field outside of Minsk.

These are just the latest examples of outrageous and unacceptable government harassment. We cannot forget the hundreds of people who were arrested during the peaceful protests after the March 19 elections nor those detained before the elections. Many Belarusian activists remain in jail for exercising their rights. This includes Aleksandr Kozulin, another former candidate, who potentially faces six years in prison.

Mr. Chairman,

The Belarusian delegation, who will speak right after me, will undoubtedly take the floor and assert that its government was perfectly justified in arresting these people because they had organized an unsanctioned rally. We need to set the record straight. They were arrested, not out of concern for public safety, but because the government does not want its authority in any way challenged. Freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, and freedom to participate in a legitimate political process are all threats only to those regimes not legitimately elected. These citizens were jailed on the pretext of holding an unsanctioned rally, when according to the reports that we received from people directly connected to these events, they were in fact walking to the place where the rally was sanctioned by the government. People have a right to protest peacefully without being beaten or jailed. Detention is indefensible.

We condemn the authorities' actions in the strongest possible terms. We call on the Belarusian government to honor its OSCE commitments, especially regarding freedom of speech and assembly, and to release these people immediately. Anything short of this must be, in our organization, unacceptable.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.